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ABSTRACT

The active/passive system of English grew out of a Proto-Indo-European (PIE) system where the fundamental distinction was between active and middle voices. The middle voice included within its functions the relationship that now would be known as passive. The PIE voice system is preserved in ancient Greek and Sanskrit, and in the former, the middle voice is used when the subject of the verb is somehow affected by what is denoted in the verb. Examples of such situations in English, including those having some formal distinction, are provided, and linguistic processes by which the middle voice may develop are proposed. There is evidence that the syntax of a language changes in three fundamental ways: (1) mechanical changes in other subsystems of the language upset the functioning of the syntactic system, (2) the syntax is changed by speakers along the lines of alternate strategies of getting the same things said. These changes that are the result of communication needs may get tangled with movements along mechanical lines and force (3) analogical reanalysis of the syntactic system. The development of the middle voice is discussed both in terms of these change mechanisms and in terms of the communication needs to which the middle voice addresses itself. (CLK)

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The IE Middle Voice: A Study in Syntactic Strategy and Syntactic Change

(Presented to the Linguistic Society of America,
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The IE Middle Voice: A Study in Syntactic Strategy and Syntactic Change

Linguists have been discussing the passive voice a great deal lately; and they tend to do so as though it were the only possible voice other than the active. Yet it is interesting to note that historically, the familiar active/passive system of English grew out of a quite different PIE system. To judge from ancient Greek and Sanskrit (where the PIE voice system seems to have been most fully preserved), the fundamental distinction was between active and middle voices, the middle including within its functions, without further formal distinction, the relationship that we would call the passive.

Briefly stated, the middle voice is used in ancient Greek – the language from which the term itself comes – when the subject of the verb is somehow affected by what is denoted in the verb. In what is usually considered the proto-typical case, the agent subject does the action denoted in the verb in such a way as to affect both a stated direct object and itself. This is precisely a situation for which English has no special structure; but one can get the general idea from such colloquial expressions as *I fixed me a sandwich* and *I bought me a new hat* or even *I'm washing me a shirt* – where the *me* serves to indicate that the subject is intimately involved in and affected by the action:

I'm washing { me / myself } a shirt. SS ↻→ ("full-dress" middle)[1]

Other situations also qualify for the middle voice, however – situations which *are* distinguished in English. The subject is affected by the action also in reflexive sentences, in reciprocal sentences, and in passive ones:

I'm washing myself.	SS ↻ (reflexive)
We're washing each other.	SS ⇄ (reciprocal)
I'm being washed.	SS ← (passive)

Thus in the Greek voice system, all the situations in which the subject is affected by the action are encoded into the middle voice, and opposed to the one lone situation in which the subject is *not* stated as affected by the action, the "plain" active:

I'm washing the clothes. SS → ("plain" active)

GREEK SYSTEM:

No incoming arrow	Incoming arrow
SS → "Active"	SS ↺
	SS ⇄ "Middle" or
	SS ↱ "medio-passive"
	SS ←

English, by contrast opposes the one case in which the subject is *not doing* the action (the passive) against all the cases in which the subject *is doing* the action (the "active"):

ENGLISH SYSTEM:

Outgoing arrow	No outgoing arrow
SS →	SS ← "Passive"
SS ↺	
SS ⇄ "Active"	
SS ↱	

So much for a direct surface analysis of the middle voice which shows exactly how it differs from the familiar active/passive system. But this analysis does not give us any indication of how and why the PIE middle system should have given rise to active/passive systems in almost all the daughter languages, let alone whether it is possible or easy to develop a middle system out of a passive one.

We have progressed so far in modern linguistics that mere description – committing a language to paper in an efficient format – is no longer enough. The most productive forms of synchronic description are surely those which make the avenues by which languages change (both in general and in particular) readily analysable as well. I wish to suggest a set of considerations to make this goal possible, and will illustrate the power of the method by applying it to the voice problem.

There is increasing evidence that the syntax of a language changes in three fundamental ways: 1) mechanical changes in other subsystems of the language upset the functioning of the syntactic system (as when the loss of most final unstressed syllables in Middle English wiped out the case system), and/or 2) the syntax is changed by the speakers along lines of alternate strategies of getting the same things said. But these changes can also get tangled up with other movements along purely mechanical lines, and force 3) analogical reanalysis of the syntactic system. If we are to make head or tail of syntactic history, the functional

considerations underlying these types of change must be taken into account in our structural perception of language.

The history of the phonology and morphology of, say, the Indo-European languages has been traced with a certain degree of adequacy by starting from the comparison of structured descriptions, and noting the successive stages of change. The phenomenon of syntactic change, on the other hand, has never particularly lent itself to this method of approach. As recently as fifteen years ago, the standard courses in historical linguistics contented themselves with mentioning a noteworthy construction here and there (such as the "absolute" constructions of Indo-European), but providing effectively no more explanation of syntactic change than Sapir's model of the slow slosh from analytic to synthetic and back again – with perhaps a quick look at Greenberg's universals of word order, as another approach to the possible range of variation. Generative/transformational grammar, as it developed on a synchronic basis, seemed to hold out considerable hope for historical syntax. And yet precious little has been delivered to date, despite such tempting titles as King's "Historical Linguistics and Generative Grammar" (1969).

The two paragons I have already mentioned, however, share some extremely useful methodological features. To begin with, both Sapir and Greenberg attempt to set up, from empirical clues, a framework which will logically cover all the bases. Sapir, for example, presented his famous analytic/synthetic opposition, which automatically includes all the possibilities within a defined sphere of operation. Either languages glue their morphemes together or they don't. Those that do, of course, can be usefully subclassified in various ways; and Sapir goes on, in the rest of his system, to suggest a variety of synthetic types (agglutinative, fusional, etc.) (Sapir 1921, esp. Ch. 6). But no language that has morphemes will be left out. The system is on the surface a morphological scheme of classification, of course; but it is quite as much a syntactic one, in the sense that what a language doesn't handle in attached morphemes it will have to deal with in the syntax. Thus if pronominal references aren't affixed to *something* (e.g. the verb), they will have to be handled as separate words; and if noun relationships aren't handled by a morphological case system, they'll have to be embodied mostly in relational words such as prepositions and postpositions.

Greenberg (1963, 1966) similarly tries to cover the bases with a carefully structured strategy. Thus no language that has transitive verbs and adheres to de Saussure's property of linearity (de Saussure 1915, 103)[2] will fall through his net for dominant word order, since all of the six possible permutations of subject, object, and verb are listed explicitly. Modifiers too (to take another example) can come either before or after their heads. And so forth. Historical changes in word order can thus be described exhaustively, if nothing else, within Greenberg's synchronic classification, as long as the basic assumptions are met.

The usefulness of both Sapir's and Greenberg's work thus comes partly from the exploitations of structural features to isolate and describe a self-contained sphere of classification, and partly from the possibility of using these particular self-contained sets to describe economically some of the dynamic systems of checks and balances we see constantly at work in the observed histories of languages. Can we apply such a method systematically to the study of syntactic change? Can we learn to choose parameters suitable for clarifying the workings of syntax diachronically?[3]

Syntax is more difficult to deal with than phonology or morphology, however, because as a system it has yet another degree of complexity. It not only has form and meaning, it also contains strategy – in fact, the syntax of a language is a collection of strategies for getting things said.[4] If a speaker can't get something said one way, he'll concoct another way, and yet another, combining what other strategies he has at hand until he gets the message through. The combined strategies available to a speaker are extremely numerous, and often quite complex. But although they may even be infinite in number upon occasion, they are, as linguists are well aware, nonetheless restricted in a variety of ways, the restrictions being imposed chiefly by the basic design features which human language has settled upon (such as high redundancy, and linearity) or which it is stuck with (such as our human limitations on perception, memory, and energy). We must systematically investigate these strategies as strategies. We will also continue to have to deal, on a somewhat separate level from the strategies themselves, with the grammatical structures used to implement these strategies, since grammatical structures (like any other arbitrary system in human culture) tend to take on something of a life of their own, once created.

Our most efficient course of approach to the history of syntax, then, would seem to

be to isolate a communication need and trace out the strategies used to express it under the restrictions operating at the moment. For example, every language as we know it has to have some way of showing the relationship of its NP's to the verb in a simple proposition.[5] The logical possibilities appear to be word order (*He gave the dog a bone*), a separate relational word (*He gave a bone to the dog; the tail of the dog wagged furiously*), or a relational affix (*The dog's tail wagged furiously*). Affixes would be attached most logically to the noun in question, but conceivably attached elsewhere (as in verbal markers for subject or object agreement). Historically, then, we can trace the marking of noun relationships – a single communication need – as a function of these three rather common expressional strategies.

On the other hand, Perlmutter and Postal have demonstrated that the passive is fundamentally a strategy to move NP's in and out of subject rank;[6] but the communication needs underlying this one expressional strategy can be quite diverse. For one thing, in an accusative-type language (which is the only kind I'm considering in this paper), it might be necessary to kick out the agent-subject (and hence promote another NP, since the sentence requires a subject), a) because the agent is unknown to the speaker (e.g., "The window was broken" – and I know nothing more), b) because the speaker wishes to avoid mentioning the agent ("The window was broken" – but I won't tattle on my friend), or c) simply because the speaker considers the actual agent irrelevant ("Taxes were raised again"). There are three different needs right there. On the other hand, one might need to promote an NP *into* subject function (therefore presumably entailing the demotion of the normal subject) in order to give it some privilege or hang on it some complicated subordinate structures that for some reason it can't take where it is.[7] We thus have at least four different communication needs employing the same expressional strategy, whatever the exact mechanical strategy for passivization happens to be in that language.

So we must become proficient at isolating both single communication needs, along with the structures they entail, and also groups of communication needs which employ the same single structure. Then we can move on to the most complicated cases – those in which two or more communication needs get tangled up in appropriating the same grammatical vehicle for expression. And in fact, this seems to be what happens when a

middle voice system occurs. To disentangle the events, then, let us look first at the communication needs served, and then at the possible strategies.

The middle voice, as we have seen, includes both the passive and what in English is handled by the active in conjunction with a variety of pronouns. We have just discussed the communication needs to which the passive addresses itself. But what needs do the other structures serve? A quick glance at the English pronouns shows that in each case the pronoun is showing that some "lower" NP in the proposition is identical to the agent-subject: the reciprocal shows distributive identity of direct object and subject, the reflexive shows non-distributive identity. In what I called the "full-dress" middle, it is simply the *in*-direct object or "beneficiary" which is identical to the subject NP. So the middle voice is at heart merely another way to be able to mark the identity of a lower NP to the subject.

So much for the communication need; now for the strategy. The most usual strategy for marking passivization is to put a flag in the verbal complex – something which says, in effect: "BEWARE: the subject is *not* the expected agent of the verb." Note, however, that it would be equally possible (and logically more specific) to mark the shift right in the NP slot, with some sort of morpheme proclaiming that the attached noun was indeed the surface subject but was logically the patient, the beneficiary, or whatever. The identity of a lower NP to the subject, on the other hand, could presumably be marked most easily by putting a flag in the NP slot itself: and this is exactly what English does, by putting a reflexive or reciprocal "pro-noun" in the spot where the NP identical to the subject is deleted. But another possibility is to put a flag in the verbal complex – one which says, in effect: "BEWARE: some NP further down the line has been deleted because of identity with the subject." And that is exactly what PIE, Greek, and Sanskrit have done with their middle voice markers.

Now, if it so happens that passivization and identity-marking have each been reduced to a single flag in the verbal complex, a new possibility opens up. The two *could* stay separate forever, simply by using different morphemes as flags. But the process of verb-flagging itself is now wide open to reanalysis by the speaker, since – although for various reasons – we now have to flag the verb every time whatever is denoted by the subject is affected by the action. This simple reanalysis leads directly to the sort of middle voice

system reconstructed for PIE and attested in Greek. Of course, we don't have the origin of the PIE system recorded for us; but we can see clearly the circumstances that could give birth to it. And exactly this kind of reanalysis of function is taking place under our very eyes in modern Romance languages. In French, such morphemes as *se* can be seen expanding from analysis as simple reflexive/reciprocal pronouns (i.e. NP identity markers) into agent-demotion (passive) territory by way of agentless "impersonal" constructions, until they become ready for reanalysis as markers for *any* situation in which the subject is affected by the action, regardless of whether it is also agent of the action:

> "Les portes se ferment à 2 heures." The doors get (→ are) closed at 2:00."
> (SS ⟲ "catalytic")

The middle system can dissolve again, of course, through a re-strengthening of the pronominal system for marking NP identities right in the NP slots. And that is exactly what happened to the middle voice in most of the IE daughter languages (although they vary as to whether they retain the old middle marker for the new passive, or develop a whole new form).

Hence we see the middle voice being formed by the tangling up of different communication needs which happen to have appropriated the same strategies of expression. And the complicated history of voice in some IE languages can be seen as a sort of sloshing back and forth between different possibilities of expression for some rather basic communication needs.

More generally, however, note that the parameters I have suggested lay out clearly the bounds of the channel within which languages will have to slosh (as it were) as they move along through time. That is, the lines of *possible* change begin to become apparent and identifiable within this framework. Second, a variety of seemingly unrelated grammatical phenomena begin to fit into a coherent picture.

In addition, since the standard theory of morphological change by analogy is limited to what happens to affixed morphemes, the framework presented here logically encompasses it. The sort of analogic restructuring that we looked at in voice systems is on a level more complex than that of strictly morphological analogy, precisely because it takes into account the wider notion of counterbalancing strategies.

In fact it is the counterbalancing of one expressional force against another – better yet, the counter-*pulling* of one force against another – that keeps a language within this metaphorical "channel": constantly shifting and changing, yet always within the channel of dynamic stability as long as it is a viable language. (See Barber, forthcoming.) The parameters I suggest seem to make the course of that channel rather clearer.

NOTES

[1] SS = "Surface Subject". A variety of examples (from Greek and other languages) and also a fuller explanation of all six voice categories mentioned here can be found in Barber 1975.

[2] That humans can have highly productive and arbitrary native languages which are not so linear as spoken speech has been recognized recently by those linguists working with American Sign Language. And there it can happen that, say, subject and verb be simultaneous. A different set of possibilities would have to be generated to study such languages typologically by this strategy.

[3] Sarah Gray Thomason (1975) has already discussed some of the parameters necessary for dealing with diachronic morphology in this way.

[4] I am indebted to Edward Keenan for this useful characterization of syntax.

[5] The general Fillmorian model of "case grammar" is particularly useful in grasping the ramifications of this example.

[6] Presented by them at the Linguistic Institute, Summer 1974 (Amherst), under the title "Relational Grammar". Note that the shift is primarily functional – it may or may not be physical.

[7] The NP accessibility hierarchy implies this conclusion very strongly for at least some languages, and a number of languages have been cited which bear it out empirically: see Keenan and Comrie (1974). Fred Householder has pointed out to me, however, quite correctly, that IE did not use its passive device as a strategy to make NP's *into* subjects. The explanation appears to me to be that it had such an elaborate system of participles and case-markings that it could handle everything right in the original NP slot.

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